

Russia's lockdown of Odessa ports could be a grim turning point in war

by George Beebe,* USA



George Beebe. (Picture <https://quincyinst.org>)

A lesson to all purveyors of the idea that Ukraine could be a 'steel porcupine' and avoid a mutual agreement to end the conflict. It's a trap.

Over the course of a few short weeks, a grim new reality has taken shape in Ukraine. Russia¹ has shown that it need not conquer and occupy Ukraine's entire Black Sea coastline to turn that country into the equivalent of a landlocked state. It need only deny access to Ukraine's critically important Odessa port complex, something it is doing quite effectively through air and missile strikes on port facilities and approaching ships.

That reality will probably not amount to a knock-out blow in the ongoing war. But it is likely to have a profound impact on Ukraine's already gloomy post-war prospects – and, by extension, on the contours of a new European security landscape in the current conflict's aftermath.

Only a handful of months ago, Russia was conducting few military operations against Odessa. Early in the war, attacks by Russia and Ukraine on merchant shipping in the Black Sea had threatened to choke off agricultural exports vital to world markets. Under pressure from India and other key partners in the Global South, Moscow agreed to the so-called "Grain Deal" with Ukraine, brokered by Turkey and the United Nations, to allow unimpeded commercial exports from the region.

For some four years thereafter, the Odessa port system remained open to Ukrainian imports and exports, handling some 90% of Ukraine's agricultural trade. Russian hardliners bristled at Russian President *Vladimir Putin's* refusal to attack



Ukraine's vital but vulnerable port, grumbling that Putin seemed more interested in avoiding rifts with Global South states than defeating Ukraine.

Several factors have combined to change this picture. One was the evident failure of the West's campaign to turn Russia into a pariah state, a brainchild of the Biden administration that had magnified the importance of the Global South to Moscow as a means of avoiding international isolation. A second has been the depletion of Ukrainian air defense interceptors, which has left Odessa largely defenseless against Russian ballistic missiles and allowed bomb-carrying aircraft to operate in closer proximity to the port complex, increasing the accuracy and destructiveness of Russian air strikes.

Ironically enough, perhaps the most important factor was Ukraine's own "40-day influence campaign" announced in late June, which included long- and medium-range drone strikes on energy infrastructure in Russia and merchant shipping in the Sea of Azov. Ukrainian President *Volodymyr Zelensky* said the campaign was aimed at "influencing the aggressor state in order to compel it to end the war." President Trump described it more plainly as an "escalation that we hope will lead to peace."

In practice, however, the escalation allowed Russia to deflect Global South criticism for violating terms of the Grain Deal by arguing it was Ukraine that had kicked off the recent cycle of shipping and port attacks.

* George Beebe is the Director of Grand Strategy for the Quincy Institute. He spent more than two decades in government as an intelligence analyst, diplomat, and policy advisor, including as director of the CIA's Russia analysis and as a staff advisor on Russia matters to Vice President *Cheney*.

The near-term effects have been disturbingly clear. Since July 22, the Russian military has effectively closed the Ukrainian port complex in and around Odessa to all shipping. The loss of its remaining deep-water ports is already having a devastating effect on Ukraine's agricultural exports – the backbone of its economy – which officials warn may plummet by 50% in the coming months because alternative land, rail, and river routes have much less capacity and are much more costly.

The damage to Ukraine's economy probably will be manageable in the near term so long as Europe² steps up its flow of aid. But the impact of Odessa's closure on Ukraine's post-war prospects may prove to be much more profound.

It has long been assumed in both Washington and Europe that the main alternative to a compromise settlement of the Russia-Ukraine war is the transformation of Ukraine into a "steel porcupine."³ The concept envisions a heavily armed and fortified Ukraine that can serve as a barrier to further Russian aggression and allow the hot war to settle into a stable, frozen conflict.

Proponents of this vision dismiss prospective "land for peace"⁴ deals with Moscow and oppose any quantitative or qualitative limitations on Ukraine's military – points that Russian officials say are essential to any peace deal – arguing that such concessions would "reward Russian aggression" and prevent Ukraine from becoming an Eastern European variant of Israel,⁵ a "Major Non-NATO Ally"⁶ that punches well above its weight-class in regional affairs and serves as a keystone of broader European defense plans.

However, if Russia can use air and missile attacks to deny Ukraine the use of its port facilities, it can also prevent Ukraine's post-war reconstruction and economic revitalization. Just as merchant ships will not risk Russian attacks to enter Odessa, construction firms are unlikely to risk Russian airstrikes in attempting to build or repair bridges, roads, factories, ports, and other vital infrastructure. Nor will investors risk hundreds of billions of dollars if Russian missiles and bombs can destroy any Ukrainian reconstruction project in a matter of hours.

Without large-scale economic reconstruction and the jobs and stability that would follow, few

of the millions of Ukrainians who fled the war (most for Europe but many for Russia) will return. Absent mass repatriation, Ukraine is likely to enter a demographic death-spiral. By Ukrainian officials' own admission, a population that approached 52 million people when the Soviet Union broke up now stands at between 22 and 25 million people, and nearly half of them are retirees.

According to one estimate,⁷ Ukraine's working age population – the backbone of both its civilian economy and its military – could lose an additional third by 2040. The number of children, the embodiment of Ukraine's future, could decline to half its pre-war level.

This raises an obvious but under-discussed question: How can an aging and dying Ukrainian population, lacking a strong economic base, serve as a "new Sparta"⁸ countering a nuclear-armed Russia that is seven times its size?

The closure of Odessa should highlight two salient points for Western leaders. First, neither Ukraine nor the West can eliminate the threat of Russian air and missile strikes through military means alone. Second, Russia will have strong reason to continue them, even after it eventually halts large-scale ground operations, if the Kremlin worries that the West will otherwise turn Ukraine into a safe haven for threatening Russian security.

As a result, the alternative to an uncomfortable compromise settlement of the war will not be a steel Ukrainian porcupine. It will be a weak and dysfunctional rump state that ill-serves Ukrainians and undermines Europe's broader security.

Source: <https://responsiblestatecraft.org/odessa-ports-ukraine-russia/>, 11 August 2026

¹ <https://responsiblestatecraft.org/tag/russia/>

² <https://responsiblestatecraft.org/regions/europe/>

³ <https://www.politico.eu/article/steel-porcupine-ukraine-volodymyr-zelenskyy-plans-defend-itself-after-war/>

⁴ <https://meduza.io/en/feature/2026/07/03/how-the-trump-putin-summit-in-alaska-spawned-the-kremlin-s-myth-of-the-spirit-of-anchorage-and-why-it-collapsed>

⁵ <https://www.jpost.com/international/article-703335>

⁶ <https://www.state.gov/major-non-nato-ally-status/>

⁷ <https://population-europe.eu/research/books-and-reports/war-and-future-ukraines-population>

⁸ <https://jstribune.com/rise-of-the-new-spartas/>